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Career Paths and the Superintendency: Women Speak Out

Nancy Hergenrother Seyfried
University of Dayton

Thomas Diamantes
Wright State University

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According to the 2000 census, women comprise nearly 51% of the American population. Women constitute two thirds of the work force in education. Seventy-five percent of teachers are women; 41% of principals are women, and women fill 60% of central office administration positions, yet, at the superintendent level, only 10% are women (Vail, 1999). Guthrie (1999) found that the shortage of women in top education positions mirrors other fields. Women make up 50% of the work force, yet they represent fewer than 11% of the corporate officers of companies and 3% of the heads of companies. Women are relative newcomers to the fields of law, government, and business. In education, they are not new to the field. Keller (1999) indicated that policy experts indicate that the status of women is one of the most troubling leadership issues in education.

Newton (2000) observed that the low number of women in the superintendencies in Pennsylvania, New York, and Texas was representative of the distribution in the United States. In spite of recruitment, state school officials observed that the low rates might not be caused by discrimination but by minimal interest among women in the position. In a field otherwise dominated by women, the question arises: Why are there so few women in the position of school district CEO, the superintendent?

Keller (1999) asserted that the lack of data is a major hindrance to improvement in the status of women. There are few efforts at the state and national level to track the number of women entering and leaving the position or to offer explanations for discrepancies among the data. Historically, research about leadership has focused on male leadership, and interest in female leadership has only emerged in the last 20 years (Harman, 2001; Skrla, 1998b). Furthermore, women themselves have been the leaders in conducting research on women in the superintendency (Brunner, 1998). Vail (1999) argued that the differences between the leadership style of males and females might be a matter of personality and philosophy, not gender. Research on androgynous leadership has not yielded significant findings, but

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About the Authors

Nancy Hergenrother Seyfried received her Bachelor and Masters degrees in Special Education from Clarion University, and Ed.S. degree from Wright State University, and is currently a doctoral student at the University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio. She has been a teacher, administrator, elementary principal, and now is adjunct faculty for Wilmington College in Ohio.

Dr. Thomas Diamantes is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership at Wright State University where he teaches graduate courses in the administrator preparation program.

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profiles of successful leaders appear to combine characteristics from both masculine and feminine models (Vail, 1999).

An additional phenomenon in education confounds the problem. The pool of administrators is dwindling (Morie & Wilson, 1996). Seventy-one percent of superintendents are over 50 years of age and are expected to retire after 35 years of service to education. Thus, one third are likely to retire by 2005 (Dunne, 2000). The generations replacing them, born between 1965 and 1977 and between 1978 and 1983, are fewer in numbers. Members of these replacement generations appear to be changing the ways in which women view their participation in the workforce, that is, they appear to desire more flexibility and balance between life and work and seem less willing to sacrifice family for careers than did their mothers (Harman, 2001).

Newton (2000) noted the low numbers of women in the superintendency in Pennsylvania, New York, and Texas at less than 20%. More women than men are in graduate programs and more women than men hold doctoral degrees in education.

An overview of the literature reveals four areas that contribute to the scarcity of women aspiring to or maintaining positions in the superintendency: family issues, perceptions (including stereotypical perceptions of gender), lack of mentors or sponsors, and disincentives for the position. Career has powerful effects on home and family. A set of competing urgencies are present for women and balancing these urgencies is difficult (Bascia & Young, 2001). Important domestic relations have a significant impact on the careers of women. A spouse's support has a greater effect on the career path of females than males (Ramsey, 1997). A husband's encouragement and support may be critical for the success of the wife. In

fact, women may not be successful in the superintendency without the support of the spouse, especially "if your marriage comes first" (Fulmer, cited in Ramsey, 1997, p. 1).

Men and women react differently to the need for balance and healthy family relationships. A commitment to the family's children and recognition that "the family is too young" to make a career change or commitment may affect professional women more than men (Ramsey, 1997). Children may represent a strong "pull" on the time of women. Additionally, Moen and colleagues (cited in Williams, 2000) found that 44% of men and 49% of women reported that the husband's career received top priority, and that the wife's career is interrupted for a geographical move intended to bolster the husband's career.

Time constraints related to providing for the family also can impact women's decisions to enter the superintendency. Only 8% of mothers aged 25 to 44 work outside the home for 10 to 14 hours per day—the time frame necessary to be successful as a superintendent (Williams, 2000). Few women are willing to deduct such an amount of time from the family for career advancement.

Because women enter the superintendency later in their careers, fight harder to get there and stay there, undergo greater scrutiny than men entering and holding the position, and remain a minority, there are fewer networks upon which they might rely; thus, the support of family, friends and colleagues is valued highly (Ramsey, 1997). Vail (1999) reported that a recent superintendent of Memphis City Schools stated that women opt out of the superintendency because of a mismatch between being a top executive and maintaining a family. Issues of scrutiny, privacy, tradeoffs in priorities, and the long hours associated with the position affect women's decisions to include the superintendency as an element in their career decisions.

Perceptions held and voiced by women and by others are another factor affecting women contemplating advanced leadership in education. Others perceptions also affect women. Gender bias is perpetuated through external perceptions. Olsson (2000) referred to gender bias as the "masculinist paradigm." Leadership may be perceived by outsiders as a masculine concept that is permeated by masculine ideals to such a degree that women should not attempt to identify with them (Harman, 2001). Vail (1999) indicated that men and women have difficulty accepting females as leaders; a practice that increased reliance on a stereotype of women as difficult bosses. Brunner (1998) stipulated that no empirical evidence exists that women operate in the workplace in a manner different from men, but that, instead, evidence exists that men and women see, value and know their work worlds differently. It is problematic when men are perceived to be more effective as leaders by

superiors and by subordinates—including women (Brunner, 1998; Harman, 2001; Vail, 1999). Lewis (1998) reported that perceptions of differences between men and women continue to exacerbate the issue.

The perceptions of others regarding the gender of the teacher or administrator have their roots in history and maintain relevance today. The thinking of the 19th century was that a woman could not serve two masters—home and school. At the turn of the 20th century, 95% of female teachers (who made up 75% of all teachers) were single, widowed or divorced (Sullivan, 1996). Well into the 1920s and 1930s, women who married were required to resign teaching positions. The single-only bias towards women applied to women in management as well. Leadership was considered a masculine calling; women who pursued leadership positions were considered "deviant." Men affirmed their stability and sexuality through marriage. Women, conversely, had their sexuality and stability questioned by remaining single and striving to hold leadership positions (Sullivan, 1996). Blount (cited in Sullivan, 1996, p. X) pointed out that "unlike women, male teachers and school administrators were expected to be married to indicate strength of character and masculinity [sexuality]." Grogan (1996) reported that a female aspiring superintendent declared that, in her opinion, even if a man were to have sexual encounters outside of marriage, it would bolster the idea that he was not gay. A woman, however, would be labeled "promiscuous," clearly a negative connotation. Grogan further stated,

> Sexuality cannot be ignored as it is an integral part of daily life experiences of both men and women, but if women remain relatively invisible in certain settings it does not threaten to disrupt the dominant discourse. Where it becomes an issue is in the professional sphere, when the question of sexual motive can be asked of one administrator hiring another administrator. Again, a woman's subordinate position makes her even more vulnerable. (p. 10)

Self perceptions are another powerful factor. A woman's self concept and perceptions of abilities are significant factors to entry into and advancement within the superintendency (Bascia & Young, 2001; Lewis, 1998; Sharratt & Derrington, 1993). The role of self-concept is known to have a significant impact on one's motivation and aspirations for achievement (Sharratt & Derrington, 1993). Shakeshaft concurred and stated that an undocumented, but real, barrier to women was low self-image and low self-confidence (cited in Sharratt & Derrington, 1993). Grogan (1996) cited one of the significant qualities expressed by women in her study was their ability to reflect on who they are and what they do. Women have higher

self-expectations than men. They do not give up their concerns over being a wife and mother; they just add to them and "jump higher" (Williams, 2000).

Men have been perceived to possess characteristics that are aligned with leadership: aggressiveness, low emotionality, and high self-confidence. Women have been said to have characteristics that are not associated with leadership, such as emotionality, kindness and nurturance. Despite mixed results from research about gender difference and leadership, these perceptions remain prevalent. Leaders' self-perceptions affect performance and motivation to advance and leaders who perceive themselves to be lacking are reluctant to apply for high level positions (Lewis, 1998). Disincentives inherent to the position and those specific to gender affect women's attitudes toward upper level management positions. Salary is a disincentive for both sexes. Average superintendents' salary was $98,106 prior to 1998 (Statistical Abstracts, 1998). Increases in salaries for educators have been greater at the lower steps of the salary schedule (Endangered Species, 1999). This would support the anecdotal evidence suggesting that teachers with fewest years of experience gain financially by moving into entry-level administrative positions. Women, however, entering administration later than men and bringing more years of educational experience (Tallerico & Tingley, 2001), may not reap benefits in moving into administration roles.

A second disincentive to women entering the superintendency is the career path itself. The most traveled path to the superintendency requires experience as a high school principal, although no research supports the contention that high school principals make better superintendents (Tallerico, cited in Vail, 1999). Women, serving education as elementary teachers and perhaps moving into elementary principalships, may lose the opportunity to progress to the superintendency by circumventing the natural and expected career path choices (Endangered Species, 1999). Keller (1999) suggested that being married decreased a woman's chances for a secondary administrator's position and that the probability for becoming a high school principal—a key step to the top position of superintendent—remained far below that of men.

Additional disincentives loom on the horizon. Some states are lowering the bar by allowing non-educators to assume superintendencies, and at the same time increasing requirements for certification of administrators. Men hold the majority of leadership positions in corporations, government, and the military. The majority of experienced educators are women. The current trend to award superintendencies to non-educators constitutes another incentive for male leadership progression and a more difficult path for women (Tallerico & Tingley, 2001).

A final disincentive to women seeking to be superintendents is related to the opportunity to have mentors or sponsors. Grogan (in Vail, 1999) reported

that women superintendents were those who had the advantage of a male mentor with contacts with school board members and search committees. Search consultants recommend males, more than females, for superintendent positions (Vail, 1999). Search committees are comprised of men. Research suggests that humans related strongly to persons that resemble them; since consultants, often former superintendents themselves, and search committee members are men, there may be few opportunities for women to be recommended for open positions (Vail, 1999). Shakeshaft (cited in Sharrett & Derrington, 1993) identified lack of support, encouragement and counseling, lack of role models, sponsors or mentors, and limited access to vacancy networks as disincentives for women. Furthermore, the availability of female role models and the availability of sponsorship or mentorship were two of four barrier statements identified as significant ($p < .05$) for females seeking to secure a position as a superintendent (Sharratt & Derrington, 1993). The researchers also reported that the lack of sponsorship or mentorship further impeded women's advancement into the superintendency.

Schneider (1991) provided several explanations for the lack of mentoring among women. Men who serve as mentors attend to the mentoring task and are engaged for a short period of time; women tend to pursue the relationship within the mentoring. Women are less likely than men to initiate mentoring contacts. Such passivity results in less contact with the mentor. Women, as mentors, may not have positions of influence. Finally, women protégés have a greater fear of failure than men and require a longer period of time to see themselves in the roles for which they are being mentored.

The Study

The purpose for conducting this study was to explore, with credentialed and qualified women educators, career paths in educational adminstration. The research was qualitative. Data were collected through focus groups and mailed surveys. Six persons attended two focus groups that lasted approximately 90 minutes each. The interaction of the members of the focus groups and the focus of inquiry allowed for the maximum exploration in the amount of time available. Seven persons unable to attend focus groups were surveyed by mail; 5 responded resulting in 11 participants in the study.

Participants

The 11 women professionals were employed in different school districts. Only one had been a superintendent. Respondents were of the age that most women, according to literature, in education typically enter the superintendency. Two had been married and had no children. Two were divorced with grown children. Seven were married with nearly grown

children. They varied in undergraduate and graduate educational backgrounds.

Instrumentation

A discussion guide, provided to each focus group participant, included the following questions:

1. Are you seeking a position as superintendent: Why or Why not?
2. What was your motivation for pursuing a career in educational administration?
3. What barriers do you see or have you encountered (in your career path)?
4. What have you found to support or motivate you in your career path?

The same questions were sent, along with a stamped self-addressed envelope, to those participants who could not attend the focus groups.

Themes

Three themes emerged from the responses of the participants. (a) pervasive and persistent gender stereotypes, (b) family conflicts, and (c) lack of networking opportunities.

Gender Stereotypes and Bias

Gender bias was a much discussed subject. One participant, ready to retire from her position as Director of Student Services in a large suburban district, reported that at the beginning of her career, she was too naïve. She had served as a curriculum coordinator and "right hand" to the superintendent in a previous district. She said,

> I did it all. But I wanted to be home with my children in the summer. The superintendent said that would be okay, as long as I got the work done. Of course, he adjusted the salary accordingly, and I still worked all summer to get it done. It took years to get that salary back up.

Another participant, nearing retirement with 29 years of experience in education, said, "The gender bias goes way back. For my generation—my father said, 'you'll be a teacher or you won't go to college.'" Choices did not appear to be available to this group of women. Planning a career was a factor for only three participants—all of whom were young, relative to the pool of participants. The remaining participants reported that their careers just seemed to "evolve." Gender bias was reported in the expectations and the lack of credibility. One participant stated,

> There's just no credibility in being a superintendent as a woman. You work twice as hard, but no one knows it. Men are allowed to take the credit. If a district is doing well, the male superintendent "is doing a good job." If the superintendent is a woman, well, "she has a great staff."

Another participant referenced her experience as a principal with multiple requests of the board for an elementary school guidance counselor.

> We had two different superintendents during that time, and . . . I watched as the business person got an assistant and the tech coordinator got an assistant. [The superintendent] told me "I don't want to hear it anymore." This was part of the reason I wanted to leave. It was so frustrating and overwhelming. We had 450 kids and no guidance counselor. And I begged for one. When I left, they hired a man to replace me and lo and behold, he got a part-time guidance counselor. It always struck me that men always seem to get what they ask for. For women, it's kind of like being a mom—they figure you're a woman, so can just deal with it.

Another respondent shared:

> When I was named superintendent [15 years ago] and went to the first superintendents' meeting, I was met with three reactions: (a) genuine people who react with you as a person; (b) patronizing, sexist types, who would say, "you sure improve the looks of the group;" and (c) people who would just ignore me and couldn't deal with me.

Another subject added that others gossiped or made comments about what she wore.

> I was judged by how I looked. Women are judged by their appearance. It is a view of women as a whole in the community. Women are not supposed to be in those positions. I got comments for wearing "short" skirts, when in fact I avoided wearing skirts at all, but purposefully [wore] work pantsuits. But the clothes I wear—because I am small, appear youthful—that can be a problem. I got judged on how I looked.

Issues of sexuality were a great concern for the participants. No one, they agreed, would ever accuse a man of sleeping his way to the top. But this was an issue for these women. One subject made sure she took her husband with her to evening events. None of the women felt like they could "go out for a beer" with a male colleague or superintendent after a meeting, or outside of a group, without fear of repercussion and accusation that would further damage credibility.

Networking and gender bias were linked in the conversations with the participants. One administrator remarked,

> So much administration happens on the golf courses. I've tried to join them, but I'm treated like I should be carrying their bags. I go to athletic department meetings, and they're all men, and they look at me like I hate all athletes just because I am a woman. One student I had to discipline pleaded with me not to suspend him just because "he was a football player."

Another participant commented, "At [district name] that wasn't the case. To get in you had to drink like a fish! At the big administrators' conference every year in August—the women would shop and the men would go drink!" Another reported,

> I was naïve when I entered administration. I did not realize how pervasive the "good old" boys club was. Networking is important in any field. But taken to extreme, it excludes many. I found out quickly that if I didn't play golf with the guys, I was not in on many of the team-building activities in the district.

Another participant reported the lack of networking was keeping her out of administration. "It's such a powerful force."

All the participants reported gender stereotypes. One participant articulated the problem. "As a woman, you're pushy, 'ballsy.' But if you were a man, they would say 'he's being aggressive.' How do you go in the middle? You're too aggressive or you're too weak." The "women are bitchy; men are strong" mentality was pervasive. One participant commented, "at one of my first administrator meetings as a high school principal, the group was told to take care of their wives, they're going to be needing them. I asked, 'How do I get one of them?' I felt I needed a housewife!" The participants struggled with family responsibilities as they moved into and through administrative ranks. The women who had no children acknowledged that they experienced more freedom in their work. One participant said, "Its way beyond eight to four [o'clock]." Two other participants, who had children in the home, emphasized the difficulty in maintaining balance. Another, with high school children in the home, was putting off career advancements until the teens had graduated high school. Three participants had children growing up when they were advancing through their careers. One said of her children,

> I felt like my teenagers could take care of themselves in high school. They were great kids. I know now what I did to them by not being there. My son got into drugs. I neglected them in high school. They would say that I was

> spending more time with other people's kids than my own, but I scoffed at it. These other kids will keep on coming, but your own don't.

Another agreed. "I neglected my kids." She reported that, as adults, they had come to appreciate her accomplishments; their attitudes changed as they moved through school. "In elementary school, they said 'Mom's too busy for us.' By high school they were saying 'Mom does it all.' They could see how hard I was working at home and at school." Another participant stressed that it was easier to balance your life when "your kids are in the same school [as you are], and you can do 'double-duty' on evenings and weekends." All participants spoke of the difficulty associated with maintaining balance. References to the difficulties for spouses were made. "My husband," one said, "was resentful at times. It's difficult when your wife makes twice the salary." Another participant's marriage ended in divorce.

Perceptions

The perceptions they held and those they believed were held by others impacted the women's career paths. The perceptions that they believed were held by others were related to gender bias. The first participant to respond said,

> that word [perception] came up when I was a school principal. I was being chastised for something that was not true. The superintendent said that it was the perception that people had, so it might as well be true, so you better fix it."

Another participant said, "'Moody' is the one I hate. A man can kick a trash can across the room and be called that."

None of the participants reported negative perceptions. One referred to her education and career as "cream rising to the top." All saw themselves as capable, and all wanted to do well in the administrative position. None described themselves as leaders. What appeared to be significant in this area was that when they saw the job as doable, they saw themselves as able to lead. One participant recalled her service on a search committee "Hey, I can do as good as them!" Several participants stated that they believed they could perform the job responsibilities better than the principals who had had supervisory responsibilities for them. Several reported that they wanted to make changes and improvements that they did not observe being accomplished in their schools. All made comments that indicated they saw themselves as able to change, improve, and make a difference.

One participant recalled her father's advice, "Don't back down because you're a girl." Another remarked,

> Not only am I female, but I'm younger than most administrators. [I just think that] none of my undergraduate classes prepared me for what I would face in teaching, so now I wonder how any classes I take will possibly prepare me for being an administrator.

Her "learn as you go" philosophy expressed her self-confidence in her ability. She stated that she tried to maintain a balance in her self-perceptions. "I try to take the perceptions of others into consideration [as] I view [how] they live out the principles I value. [Some people who have negative values] carry little weight with influencing how I view myself."

The self-confidence of these women is not without battle scars. A participant who had been a high school principal, said,

> Sometimes I wonder what I'm doing—particularly when I am with the athletic directors, because I don't understand. I just keep thinking I don't belong here. Outside that role I am fine. I'm not afraid to admit I don't know. When I was a teacher I believed I was an excellent teacher and disciplinarian. But when I was an administrator, I thought "I'm not all that!" It's too complex for you to be doing it right all the time. It was a real blow for me when I realized it. When I realized I didn't have to, it was a real growing experience.

Other disincentives of administration related to the resources of time and money. Much time is necessary to attend to all responsibilities. A participant said, "I found I didn't have a life. My job was eating my heart, my soul, and my gut." Another said she intended to seek a superintendency but did not have time to finish the certification requirements, "I don't even have time for a phone call to find out [what the certification requirements were]." The additional compensation was deemed not sufficient when the amount of time one spent as an administrator was compared to the time spent as a teacher. Only one woman indicated that the particulars of the superintendency were undesirable for her. She said, "I'm not too fond of dealing with the union . . . or with facilities." Two spoke of the loneliness of leadership positions. One in particular said,

> At conferences, at county meetings, you're often the only woman. You're involved in everybody's job, but there's not one who will go out of their way to spend time with you outside of school. I made the mistake of making friends [at school]. It didn't work. Then, our job takes so much out of you that you don't want to be with anyone or even talk to anyone on the phone in the evening.

One subject summed it up: "No one encourages you, there are conflicts with the time issues, you're always battling stereotypes, and you can't network."

Summary and Conclusions

Although the question "Why are you NOT applying to be superintendent?" was asked, the more general issues of educational administration and gender stereotypes were so compelling that they dominated the discussion. Every woman volunteered information and differences were noted between the responses of the focus group participants and those responding in writing. Although the women returning written responses had no time limit, their responses were shorter and more "politically correct." The women who participated in focus groups were more emphatic and candid in their responses. Such response patterns support the contention that focus groups encourage more "give and take" and offer opportunities, in a naturalistic setting, to express opinions, emotions and experiences.

The women in this study seemed united in their need to pursue a position in educational administration. They indicated the need for change and expressed strong feelings about that need. Most expressed regret that sacrifices were needed to take on such responsibilities, and some indicated that their health suffered. But, they included comments such as "I loved it," ". . . it was exciting," "I wouldn't change a thing." One subject said concisely, "I continue to believe I can make more of an impact in an upper leadership position."

In conclusion, the women in this study reflected much of what is stated in research about women in leadership. Women are under-represented in the upper levels of administration and the reasons may be: Competing urgencies of family life, lack of time to attend to the responsibilities of the position, lack of credibility attributed to gender, and in some cases, self-doubts, or reactions to external doubts about abilities.

Paul Houston, former superintendent and executive director of the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) offered multiple reasons why educators, both male and female, do not aspire to the superintendency. He refers to the "lightning rod" aspect of the job—high expectations, politics, and public criticism, often without necessary resources; a mismatch between accountability and authority. The unrealistic expectations and criticisms are often higher for women than they are for men in the same positions. Houston (2001) suggested a need for shifts in society's expectations of the role of the superintendent and of boards of education, and in the "hearts and minds" of those who fill the role.

> The reality is that the current system is better than ever at conducting its current mission. The problem is that, while the system has gradually

> improved, conditions have exploded around it. Schools have been making incremental progress in an exponential environment. That does mean that major transformation is required—not because the system has failed, but because the mission has shifted [for both men and women].

The data in this study support gender stereotypical disincentives; when coupled with Houston's admonition, we see a further shift in gender stereotypes. Skrla (1998a) wrote that the terms "masculine" and "feminine" are socially constructed and help in creating the roles that individuals play, rather than referring to biological differences. The terms masculine and feminine, logical and intuitive, rational and emotional, aggressive and submissive, dynamic and receptive, mature and personable, competitive and cooperative, strategic and spontaneous, reliable and sociable are associated with males and females (p. 7). These are characteristics that represent wholeness in an environment, and should be embraced in the superintendency, in the central office, in educational leadership as a whole. Balance and inclusion is desirable, not exclusive. Keller stated that the superintendent's position requires redefinition so that the well-being of the superintendent and other administrators is seen as a positive contribution to the success of the organization. Alternative models may more fully embrace the reality of women's lives. Bascia and Young (2001) suggested that a model recognizing the powerful effects of home and family circumstance on career would benefit both men and women as they fulfill their equally important roles in their families.

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